

Tuesday Morning at the Mall

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A work of fiction, meant for adults. Read something else if you are not an adult, or are offended by stories with sexual content. Then again, if all you're looking for is in-out, in-out, in-out, you should probably read something else. I welcome constructive comments. Enjoy.

Bob and Diane set up on their usual perch, a small bench on the second level of the shopping mall overlooking a central court near one of the side entrances. Besides having a nice view of the court, it was protected, with a stone-finished wall behind the bench. They were frequent occupiers of the bench, sitting and watching the world go by.

Or so it seemed.

"Is the webcam still open?" Diane asked as she got out her pen and paper.

"We're still starting up," Bob answered, pointing to the MacBook screen. "Ok, authenticated to their network, yah, the camera is still wide open."

As he pointed to the screen, a window popped up showing a different view of the court below as provided by one of the Mall's wireless webcams.

"Our boxes still alive?" Diane asked.

Bob took a breath. "Python's initializing the tool... Unit one connected, two, three! Sensors and effectors synchroized -- we're locked! We're in business! Want to download updates, or fish for a bit?"

Diane peered at the other windows which appeared on the screen. "Good, batteries are in good shape. Let's update the effectors, then the sensors one by one. That way if something fucks up we can still look, just not touch."

"Right," Bob agreed, mousing around and starting the effector code downloading.

They'd placed the boxes earlier in the month, after a test period at the junior college and at home. They needed a higher-traffic area to get things sorted out and progress further.

Each box held a small printed circuit card, about two by five inches, lithium polymer batteries, WiFi antennas, and of course the sensor/effector nodes. The paired nodes in each box allowed simple beam steering. The official-looking cardboard boxes were sealed and covered with warnings identifying them as an official county pest control test, tampering punishable by

law. Diane borrowed a County jumpsuit and hung them in trees in the court, even getting one of the mall's facilities people to hold the ladder for her.

"Effector FPGA and DSP upgraded to rev 0.96, and it talks to the sensors -- self-tests complete! Still wanna hold off on the sensors, sweetie?" Bob asked.

"Ooh, here comes one -- let's wait a minute. Sensors to hot, effectors to standby please," Diane told him.

They alternated looking at the MacBook screen, and glancing at the court down below. A young woman was walking up to the shopping mall directory, right into the sensor hotspot, sipping a frothy-looking drink through a straw.

"Could be one of our students," Bob mused.

"Nah, she's up *waaaay* too early," Diane retorted. They both taught at the local community college; Diane taught Psychology and Anthropology, and Bob taught Physics and Math. Both had the usual problems with students attending early morning classes.

The girl in the court below stepped into the hotspot.

"Sensor lock," Bob said softly, glancing at the screen. The evoked potential display synthesized inputs from the sensor nodes to display a colored image of the girl's cerebral activity.

"Same old, same old," he muttered. They'd been at this point for quite a while. He was anxious to try the updated sensor code in this environment; it worked well enough at home and in Diane's school lab.

"Yeah, in a few minutes -- get ready with a sneeze, but wait for it... Oh damn, here come her buds."

"And there goes our sensor lock," Bob sighed, watching as three other girls walked up and exchanged greetings with their friend.

And the sensor display turned to mush with multiple people inside the hotspot.

Diane put her hand on Bob's back. "Even your new code won't clean *that* up."

"It's still early," he agreed.

The girls chatted, and started to move, one holding back a bit as she sipped her frothy drink.

"Ooh! Ooh! Get ready for it!" Diane whispered excitedly.

Three of the four moved, and the sensor display suddenly snapped back into clarity. Bob reached for the button...

“Wait, wait... Now!”

Bob hit the button.

*

Chrysta took another sip of her drink. Let the others head off; she’d catch up. They were just out to look anyway, not like they were gonna ...

Sneeze! A hard, fast sneeze!

She felt it, felt stuff going out her nose! Even though it was kinda cold, it stung! All over her hand, dripping down her face... She coughed.

Brittney turned. “Eww! It’s coming out your nose! Gross!” Brittney and the others laughed.

Chrysta shook stuff off her hand. Her nose stung, and she could feel stuff dripping down. “So gimme a napkin or something!” she complained.

“God, you’re so gross!” laughed Tracy.

Someone handed Chrysta a paper napkin. Her eyes were watering. “Fuck you!”

Her friends laughed more.

Bob looked to Diane. “Nice timing. Effectors check out. Download the sensor code?”

Diane smiled. “Yeah, pretty cool. Go ahead, download one and reboot. If it flies, do the others. Want something to drink?”

“Not what *she* had,” Bob nodded toward their victim, who was still cleaning up, with little help from her laughing friends. “Get me a Dr Pepper, no ice.”

Diane put her stuff down, stood up, and kissed Bob on the head. “You got it, sweetie. Don’t do anyone I wouldn’t do...”

“Ha!” Bob retorted as she walked away.

Bob commanded the effectors to standby and started downloading the combined sensor/effector update to one unit. Before, they’d just updated the effector portion. This was the whole enchilada -- full rewrites of both FPGA code and DSP. That required a cold boot and self-

calibration. If he was scared of anything, it was the self-cal in an uncontrolled environment. That's why they were going to do one box at a time.

For some reason the updated node rebooted twice, but came up running the new code -- self-test, cal, synch -- all green!

Bob started to update the other nodes, but hesitated. He decided to wait. If someone walked by, he could test things out. It was early, though, and few people were at this end of the mall. Neither of them had classes or office hours today until after lunch.

After a minute or so with nobody walking by, he started updating the remaining nodes. Of course, shortly after he started the process a young woman walked up to the mall directory.

"Sorry, honey," Bob muttered. "Just wait fifteen seconds or so..."

She walked away just as the freshly updated nodes started rebooting.

"Great timing," he said cynically.

But shortly after he restarted the client application on the Mac, a girl carrying a backpack walked up. The sensor display was crisp and clean, and a tag appeared, saying "Adderall."

"Very cool," Bob said, nodding.

Diane returned a short while later. "Here's your DP," she said as she sat down, handing him his drink. "Have any fun?"

Bob replayed the last capture event. "Looky -- crisp and clean, and with the new client and only the new protocols, CPU use is way down -- around 25% on both cores."

"Very cool!" Diane agreed. "So we can support eight nodes on the laptop? Ooh! How old did she look." Diane pointed at the amphetamine tag.

"Yeah, the recognizer seems to be working, picking up the speed signature. Like I've been saying, we can handle eight if they're all running the newer rev protocol stack."

Diane sighed. "Okay, we'll clean up the ones at my lab." Then she kissed him on the nose. "Or should we do the ones at home first?"

Bob kissed her back. "Dunno -- don't know if I want to give you more range at home..."

Diane pouted. "Awww... Wasn't I nice to you? You didn't complain..."

Bob hugged her. He'd come home from teaching his late class and she'd nailed him as he came in the door, overcoming him with effector-induced pleasure and arousal, nailing him on

the living room floor. "It was intense -- just wish I'd had the time to pee first," he reminded her, kissing her on the neck.

"Ooh, live one!" Diane whispered in his ear, pulling back a bit.

A punk shuffled up to the directory -- baggy white T-shirt, baggy pants, spiky short haircut, chains around the neck, gaudy earphones, and a shuffling gait with head-bob to make a pigeon proud.

"Ooh, pretty!" Diane said, squeezing Bob's leg.

The display was somewhat distorted, most likely from the earphone magnets, but still had more resolution, and was updating much faster.

"Give him a sneeze," Diane said.

"Really? With the magnets?" Bob asked. Sneezes were the first thing they'd learned to induce with the effectors, a short pulse that wasn't really critical in positioning or spectral content. But still, the magnets in the earphones would distort things.

"Yah, whack him -- quick, before he gets away."

"Okay..." Bob sent the command.

In front of the directory sign, their target made a strange sounding squawk as his left leg sort of shot out from under him, sending him tumbling to the ground.

"I'd say the magnets influenced beam focus," Bob suggested with a smirk.

"Yup, I'd have to agree -- but look..."

As their target scrambled to his feet, looking around for an assailant, the headphones slipped off his head.

Resulting in crisp, clear images once more. The imaging showed all the signs of a flight-or-fight response.

"Calm the poor boy down a bit," she suggested.

Bob clicked away. "Done."

*

Peter walked up to the mall directory. Okay, yah, he needed a better job and his sister's friend Jamie set him up with an interview. Moving boxes and putting crap on shelves, but she

said they started at twelve dollars an hour, and he wouldn't come home sweaty and smelling like he'd been spending the day deep fat frying cats.

What the fuck! Someone must have shoved him! He picked himself off the ground, ready to fight.

Nobody there! What the hell had that been?

Man, this whole thing sucked! He got up early, even took a shower, but his sister dissed him anyway, complaining about how he dressed. Go to hell! He was wearing his best T-shirt, pants, and chains. All she did was hassle, hassle, hassle. Just like those fuckers at the restaurant.

He took a breath and sighed. He relaxed. He felt ... different. Yeah, he had to get out of that hole. It was only a matter of time until he got hurt, from the hot oil or broken glass or some shit.

This was a chance. He remembered what his High School counselor told him last year -- "It's their game and they make the rules. You wanna play in their game, guess what?"

He turned off the music and put the earphones in his pocket. Okay, second floor on the left. As he walked off, he laughed a little. He took off the chains and put those in another pocket, then got his comb and tried to smooth out the spikes some. Okay fuckers, I'll play *your* game until I get to the point where *I* can set the rules...

*

Bob and Diane watched as the kid walked off, smoothing his hair, standing a bit straighter.

"What did you hit him with?" Diane asked.

"New code, went for broke -- tried *Satori*."

"Well, it sure did something to him!"

Their breakthrough on the effector side was realizing that while they couldn't impress a previous state, they could use the effectors to stimulate areas of the brain, stimulate so briefly, moving so quickly... And by stimulating different areas, short pulses, so short, they could guide the observed state to converge to the target state. Bob said it was easy, if you understood Kalman filtering. Diane said it was like teasing with a feather.

"Let's see those images again," Diane suggested as the guy walked off.

Toggling between the before-the-sneeze and the after images, she said, "I'll bet we can recognize that distortion, and compensate for it -- look! You can almost see the magnetic field lines on this side!"

“Yeah,” Bob agreed. “Thinner sliced calamari would help, too.”

“Find us a lab where we can do the fabrication,” Diane reminded him.

Their breakthrough for the sensors had been done while they were both postdocs at the University. Bob had taken the squid sensors Diane had been using in her psychology experiments, and significantly altered the design. The squids were superconducting quantum interference magnetometers with incredible sensitivity and bandwidth, but requiring supercooling. They jokingly called the new sensors calamari, shorthand for sliced squid -- time-sliced squid, trading a reduction in bandwidth to levels appropriate for human electroencephalographic signals, producing a device that operated at room temperatures.

“I think Prof Klein might let us do a run in the Spring, if we add her to the paper. We could visit, and be, ah, quite convincing...” Diane suggested.

“Or we could invite her here, so she can see how life goes on in the boonies,” Bob said, patting her on the leg. They’d surprised a lot of people at the university when they announced they were moving to a small town to teach at a community college. People understood better when they learned that Diane had inherited a spacious house nearby.

“Still have the hots for her, sweetie?” Diane prodded.

Bob frowned a bit but didn’t say anything.

“Kara, in my Anthro 1 class, she’s got it for you, and bad.”

Bob raised an eyebrow.

“She’s the one I tested the blissy states on, well, after *we* tested them... She was in my lab and we were talking about things, and I eased her into it so smoothly... It was so cool the way her eyes floated closed and that wonderful look filled her. Add a little hypnosis, and she opened up nicely. She has great tits, and loves someone chewing on them -- that’s what she told me, chewing. Unfortunately, her current and soon to be ex-boyfriend doesn’t like that, not ‘guy’ enough for him, I guess. I could change *his* mind, or...”

Bob shook his head, smiling. When they’d first met back at the University, he thought he was helping a Psych grad student with problems she didn’t understand. Then she helped *him* with problems *he* didn’t understand, or even know he had, hypnotizing him with her breasts and taking him to such amazing places. Love and lust intertwined with physics and psychology.

“I still say we should get married. Will you marry me?” he asked, and not for the first time.

Diane squeezed his hands. “Oh eventually, of course! You should have seen Kara when I mentioned that we weren’t quite married, and I might not mind...”

Bob shook his head. "You're the one for me."

Diane narrowed her eyes, staring intently into his. "But those nips of hers look so crinkly and tasty... Wouldn't you like to find out how good they taste? I know I would! She could live with us while she goes to school, do some cleaning, and we could send her off to the University with high recommendations..."

"Live ones coming, sweetie," Bob said, nodding down to the court.

"We'll talk about this more ... *later*..." Diane hissed, sliding a hand up the back of his head and making him moan.

Three young women, chatting happily, walked into the hotspot and to the directory.

Multiple sources, reported the computer.

"Hey, that's great!" Diane said, patting Bob on the back, congratulating him.

Sensor lock.

"But which one?" Diane asked.

"How would you like to find out?" Bob asked with a grin.

Diane snickered. "Oh, I'm feeling kind this morning..." She took the laptop and sent a command to the effectors.

One of the girls scratched and rubbed her nose.

Then another's phone went off, and they huddled closer to listen.

"Well, we know it works," Bob told Diane as the girls walked away.

Diane started handing the laptop back.

"No, I need to go pee. Be back in a few -- and don't do anybody I wouldn't do..." He stood up.

"Ha yourself!" Diane told him. Then softer, she added, "I love you."

"I know. I love you too," Bob whispered, bending over to kiss her on the head.

Moments after Bob walked off, a woman pushing a stroller entered the hotspot. Multiple sources again, but the sensors locked on one of them. Diane sent an itchy nose again, and was rewarded with the mom rubbing her nose.

Then she rocked the stroller, looking down. Was the baby making noise?

The recognizer on the computer popped up a box which read “Horny left tit.”

Diane grinned, selected a state, and sent it to the effectors. The woman smiled at the infant in the stroller as she cupped her left breast.

Diane nodded. She’d recorded a number of her own brain states while driving Bob crazy with her breasts. She liked it almost as much as he did.

The woman was leaning down, paying attention to the infant, then looking around.

Yes! Diane couldn’t believe her luck! The woman moved the stroller over to the bench right in front of sensor number two! She sat down, practically right in front of the sensor!

As Diane reconfigured things to focus on that sensor, the woman took a small blanket out of the stroller and draped it over her shoulder. Then she picked up her infant, popped buttons on her top, and started nursing, draping the blanket partially over her shoulder and her baby for privacy.

And after a little while, Diane queued up and sent one of her favorites -- *tittigasm*. Occasionally things were just right, and Bob would bring her to orgasm holding her and sucking on her. She’d managed to record one of those events. It was time to share the fun!

She watched as the young woman’s eyes closed, her lips forming a sigh, trembling a little.

Diane gave her another shot after a minute or so; the woman’s head went back, her mouth going open as she moved the infant in her arms a little.

But the woman’s head snapped upright again to a noise -- an idiot on a riding floor polisher/cleaner coming her way. She tried to wave the idiot off, but he was wearing headphones and didn’t pay any attention.

Diane frowned. The damn thing didn’t do the sensor net any good, either. Ruined everybody’s fun! Soon mom had baby on her shoulder, patting and frowning, then relaxing and smiling.

That damn thing really screwed up the sensor net -- Diane had to send multiple reboot commands to get the boxes to restart.

“Have any fun?” Bob asked when he came back and sat down.

“See that mobile floor polisher thing?” Diane asked, pointing.

“Yeah, what?”

“Screwed things up so bad I had to reboot -- and the first reboot command didn’t take!”

Bob was interested. “I’ll look at the logs later -- the new code has better error reporting. Did you get dumps when things restarted?”

Diane handed the computer back. “Don’t know. You check.” She folded her arms and fumed.

As Bob brought up a diagnostic window and started retrieving error logs from the boxes, Diane picked up her knitting.

“You were focused on one probe?” he asked, looking at the screen.

“Yah.” Diane responded flatly.

Bob knew better than to pry. He looked at the data and let Diane simmer.

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“Oh, goody!” Diane muttered, setting down her knitting. A nun was walking into their hotspot. “Get ready!” she hissed.

“Let me guess -- orgasm?” Bob suggested.

“Whopper -- multiple,” Diane leered.

Bob looked at the windows, his finger posed to send the command to the effectors. “Okay, sensor lock, patterns look pretty damn nominal, executing ... now...”

Their target didn’t do anything unusual.

“Double the power, repeat times four, send it now!” Diane hissed.

Bob complied, remarking, “Years of Catholic schooling left their mark?”

In the court below, their target put a hand on the edge of the directory display to steady herself.

“Again!” Diane hissed.

Their target put her other hand on her chest near her neck.

“More!”

Their target bowed her head slightly.

“Again, more power!”

“Effector power amp hi temp warning on number two, no, both two and three,” Bob said after sending the command. “Need to let the suckers cool off.”

They watched as other people came up to the directory display. Their target remained standing by the display, one hand on the edge, steadying herself for a couple of minutes.

She stepped back, somewhat unsteadily. She raised her head and her eyes to the skylight and smiled, her lips moving. Then she bowed her head, turned, and strode off.

Bob looked at Diane and chuckled.

Diane shook her head, smiling.

They went back to waiting.

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“Oh God -- look at that geek coming up!” Diane whispered, elbowing Bob gently.

It took Bob a moment, but he found who she must mean -- a stereotypical geek guy, so nondescript as to be practically invisible. “Fun and games time?” Bob asked.

“Oh yeah,” Diane agreed with an evil grin.

Their target walked into the hotspot and stopped, perusing the directory.

“Sensor lock? What the hell is this?” Bob said, pointing at the sensor display window.

Diane looked. “What kind of batshit is that? Did we lose lock or something?” She reached over and whacked the side of the MacBook.

“Stop it! Look! Full signal and tight synch lock! That’s what we’re getting, but I sure don’t know what it is!”

Diane shook her head. Didn’t look like any normal or even abnormal cerebral evoked potential pattern she’d ever seen. Weird potentials, in the wrong places, wrong frequencies.

“Send him a sneeze -- let’s see what happens. You recording this?”

Bob grunted, pointing at an indicator in the top of the status window, showing they were recording. He selected the sneeze stimulus in the effector window and issued the command.

Not only didn't their target do anything, the sensor windows went blank!

"What? Did they crash?" Diane whispered, looking closely at the composite evoked potential window.

"No, look at signal strength and synch," Bob insisted, moving the cursor over the status window. "We're hot and locked. It's like he's not there anymore?"

"Goose him again, sneeze last location, full power," Diane said.

"Okay sweetie, if you want." Bob clicked the effectors to full power, overriding the sensor lock check so it would whop whatever was at the last good location. "Here goes -- but I say reboot." He hit execute. "That polisher thing left some weird residue."

Their target brought his hands together, then slowly looked around. The effector nodes confirmed stimulus transmission; sensor nodes were still in synch but not sensing anything! Their target paused and looked around slowly.

"Reboot the pig," Diane sighed. "And save that dataset for later."

"No, wait," Bob said, feeding the computer commands. "Here," he said, moving the cursor to a window on the screen. "I turned off low-pass filtering, and the radiated crap from the plasma display in the directory kiosk shows up just fine! As far as the sensors are concerned, there's nobody there!"

"And there isn't," Diane told him. "He's gone."

Bob looked up. Their target was walking down the mall.

He started the sensor network rebooting. "Don't know what the hell *that* was."

Diane chuckled and rubbed his back. "Leftovers from the polisher, or a bug? If it was a bug, it will show up again, don't you worry!"

Bob shook his head. "No doubt about that!"

*

Zetex of Grindel IV strode purposefully into the shopping mall. He felt invisible and invincible! Zetex -- known and feared through the Bright Empire as Zetex the Conqueror, Zetex the Crusher, Zetex the Great, conqueror of worlds -- walked freely and openly on the world which would be his next conquest. A minor conquest, such an undeveloped backwater system -- he felt as if he could take it standing on one foot. But still, conquest is conquest; you have big ones and you have little ones. This, comparatively, was a little one.

He was invisible, as his support systems placed him in a disguise semiotically calculated so the inhabitants of this primitive world would ignore him. He was invincible -- against their primitive weapons, why, the backup systems secreted under his left thumbnail would protect him against anything the planet had, and allow him to lay waste to large portions of it!

He was invisible *now*, but in a few short weeks, he would call for his Fleet, and all on this primitive world would know Zetex the Conqueror, Zetex the Crusher, Zetex the Great!

But until then, he had planning to do, and as they say, all work and no play... This world had something of value, besides the usual raw materials, mineral and animal. Their "licorice" was an incredibly powerful and pleasurable drug to certain races including his own, and unknown in the worlds making up the Bright Empire. He was at this mall because it supposedly contained a shop which carried a more purified licorice extract than what he'd been able to obtain so far. As he scanned the display, he grumbled internally. Some times this semiotic invisibility was a hindrance, making it most difficult to extract information from these doddering animals. At that last place, he'd been sorely tempted to make use of the weapon in his right middle finger -- one which would have had that miserable excuse for a salesperson screaming to give him any and all the information he wanted.

Oh, one person he'd spoken to tried to give him information, but it wasn't in a form that was useful to him; he was, after all, a Conqueror and not a chemist. Then too, it had been so tempting to reach out and...

But there would be plenty of time for those amusements. Soon he would be among them not cloaked in invisibility, but in full battle dress! Then he would hear the sweet music of multitudes crying out for mercy -- and the only mercy they would get would be the heel of Zetex the Crusher! Until then, he would walk among them quietly, learning and planning. And in the interim, the unexpected source of profit and pleasure was always welcome.

As he looked over the list, looking for something resembling the name the other shopkeeper had mumbled...

His defensive screens flashed on, his vision tinged with red! He didn't move or respond in any visible manner -- he knew his defensive screens would protect him from one of the planet's primitive thermonuclear bombs going off beside him -- as he queried his defensive systems as he brought his hands together, readying an offensive strike.

What! He'd been attacked by a Class VII probe? Everything he'd seen, all his research said that such technology was unknown on this world! He called in the more powerful systems on his personal warship orbiting overhead. Verify! Now!

And as the systems searched and verified, another probe beam lashed out for him, one three orders of magnitude stronger! The probe didn't disturb his shields, but still, a Class VII probe? Here?

One of his crew put up a targeting reticule in his vision, superimposing an image.

Zetex was troubled. A Class VII probe generator, in *that* small a package, on a supposedly backwater world? Analyze! Now!

He cut short the technical nonsense coming through his comm channel -- summarize! The voice on the other end regrouped, and explained that the pulse came from autonomous nodes connected to a network controlled through electromagnetic radiation. There were three nodes located so far, operating on the same network. They operated in an interesting manner.

Zetex demanded -- *Who* is operating it? *Who*?

Unknown, the voice replied from the safety of distance. The operator, if there is one, could be anyplace on the planet, or it could be computer controlled, entirely automatic. Would the Great Zetex like them to sterilize the immediate surrounding area, to a distance of say 100 kilometers, as a safety measure? All life forms and electromechanical devices?

No, Zetex replied. It represented no more risk than a flying insect. Still, a Class VII probe... Zetex queried -- How widespread is the technology?

After a pause, the reply was entirely unsatisfying, maddeningly unsatisfying, but there wasn't anything he could do about it. When operating as sensors, the nodes were entirely passive. There were many, many structures which could serve as sensors. Identifying possible devices as actual sensors would be very time consuming, and would alert whoever or whatever was operating the sensor network. Same story with the effectors -- unless active, actually emitting, very very difficult to detect. What were the Great Zetex's orders?

Zetex fumed as he glanced at the images projected in front of him. Further analysis showed the devices to be manufactured from commonly available materials. He frowned at the comment in the analysis that found their construction and operation "interesting." As a military commander, he had a dislike of "interesting," from subordinates, especially the technical types, as it usually meant trouble.

But then, that's why the military had commanders -- to deal with such issues. First order, Zetex commanded, invasion fleet to stand by. While *he* was protected from Class VII devices, providing shielding to the whole damn fleet would be expensive. Could cut into profits. Conquering, at least successful conquering, was as much a business as an art. More information was needed.

Oh Great Glub, what now? Zetex was getting more exasperated by the moment.

The Bright Empire AI monitoring the situation had spotted the sudden appearance of Class VII technology, and had quarantined the planet! No, the whole damn system! Now he *couldn't* invade!

His crew, though, responded quickly and efficiently -- arguing, requesting -- the Empire's order was modified, system quarantined but under *his* dominion; review in 50 orbital periods of the planet.

50! Duralloy casing or not, Zetex was ready to wring the AI's nonexistent neck! He couldn't invade this stinking pile of *wherf* for at least 50 local years!

Then he smiled. But until then, the place was his, *all his*, with the Empire's guarantee of no interference -- nobody else would come close, unless he specifically requested it.

Plenty of time to tease out this minor problem.

But now, about that licorice... Zetex read the coordinates from the directory and started on his next wave of conquest.

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Bob started up the diagnostic again. "Dunno, might want to pull one of those things. Which was closest to the polisher when it rode by?"

Diane shook her head. "The one in the potted shrub, with the trash can on the other side."

Bob shook his head. "Weird... That one is acting fine. All of them are acting fine now. It's like the bastard disappeared all of a sudden. Look, did another cal cycle, and everything is nominal. I cut out the low-pass filters, and they spot the plasma display just fine. Don't know, sweetie."

"Well, here's your test, walking right up," Diane told him.

A couple sauntered up, arms around each other.

The display showed *Sensor Lock*.

"Oh shit," Bob muttered. "Why didn't it tag multiple sources?"

Diane pointed suddenly. "That's why, sweetie!" She pointed to another box showing *Afterglow*.

Bob chuckled and gave Diane's waist a squeeze. "Yup, makes sense." After an intense period of lovemaking and snuggling, they stayed in a more or less synchronized state they'd identified as *Afterglow*. "What 'cha want to give them as a present? We can probably hit both of them at once."

Diane nodded. "We should try that ourselves. Here." She reached over and selected *Bliss*. Bob overrode targeting parameters and hit *execute*.

“Awww....” Diane muttered as she watched.

*

Rick and Sherry walked into the mall, holding each other.

“Still want to do this?” he asked as they stood in front of the directory.

“You bet -- I want everyone to know,” she replied, looking at him, still feeling the glow she could see on his face.

“Which jewelry store?” he asked.

She started to answer, but the glow she felt got stronger, warmer. She moved closer, putting her arms around him, closing her eyes and tilting her head slightly as she pursed her lips.

It was all the invitation he needed.

“Awww,” Bob chimed in, watching the pair down below kiss.

“Look at this!” Diane whispered, nudging him and pointing to the screen.

Bob looked, nodding. “Yeah, makes sense. The base patterns match, and the controlling code already is trying to do multiple locks -- yeah, look here, the corrected centroids for the effectors are offset for one and two, and three looks like it’s bouncing back and forth between them! I think it works!”

Diane chuckled. “Whack ‘em again -- I think they’re in love.”

“Yes, dear,” Bob said softly as he hit the button.

The couple kissed for another few minutes, then moved on.

A while later a chime sounded as a calendar window popped up on the computer screen.

“Oh drat -- office hours,” Diane sighed, reading the message.

“Anything interesting?” Bob asked.

Diane smirked. “She’s flat-chested; definitely *not* your type. But Kara’s coming in on Thursday...”

Bob frowned and started securing the probe net.

“Wanna pick up a box on the way out?” Diane asked.

Boxes

Bob shook his head. “No, let ‘em sit -- I think it was an EMF induced anomaly.”

Diane raked his thighs with her nails. “I love it when you talk dirty like that,” she growled.

Bob laughed. “Well, at least something interesting happened this morning.”

Diane shrugged as she put her things away. “Pretty boring, I’d say.”

“Well, I still love you,” Bob told her.

“I know, sweetie,” she replied.

FIN
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Tuesday Morning at the Mall
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